

Suzanne Nunziata, center, assistant director of the St. Petersburg VA Regional Office, and staff celebrate hitting the \$1 million mark in payouts under the Quick Pay Disability initiative.



Quick Pay, Big Results

St. Petersburg's pilot claims program pays \$1 million in veterans benefits to date.

When Suzanne Nunziata, then acting director of the St. Petersburg (Fla.) VA Regional Office, heard VA Chief of Staff John Gingrich's challenge to "achieve remarkable change" in the field within 60 days, she took the message to heart.

"The mandate could not have been clearer," said Nunziata. "Go home to your offices, examine your processes, and determine the best way to improve the services you provide. And do it quickly."

Armed with the chief of staff's call to action, Nunziata returned to her regional office in St. Petersburg

with a mission: Assemble a team of experts, outline a program, and secure the buy-in of stakeholders ranging from employees to veterans service organizations. Timelines were tight. Expectations were high. But Nunziata knew her team was equal to the task.

Rallying the Troops

From the beginning, Nunziata was determined to gain feedback from all quarters.

"We knew that securing input from all team members—especially from VA employees who would be responsible for making the initiative a reality—was absolutely critical to

building a successful program. From day one, we made sure that everyone involved in the initiative had a voice in the process."

After bringing a variety of players to the table—including technicians, data specialists, public affairs, and directors from other regional offices—Nunziata and her team asked themselves if some processes were creating unnecessary barriers to quick decisions on claims. After careful analysis, they realized many claims could be rated and paid with the limited evidence on hand.

The outcome of the team's effort to expedite the disability claim pay-

ment process, the Quick Pay Disability initiative, enables veterans service representatives to fast-track payments to veterans who have submitted sufficient evidence to decide all or part of a claim. The program covers a wide range of medical conditions, including diabetes mellitus and prostate cancer for Vietnam-era veterans, as well as surgery or joint replacement for a previously service-connected condition. These claims require minimal supporting evidence, allowing VA to process veterans' claims and submit payment about three months faster than the targeted 125-day cycle period.

QPD is one of more than three dozen initiatives developed as part of the VA Claims Transformation Plan, designed to "break the back of the backlog." The plan is aimed at meeting VA Secretary Eric K. Shinseki's call to eliminate the disability claims backlog by 2015, processing disability claims so no veteran has to wait more than 125 days, and ensuring a 98 percent accuracy rate in claims decisions.

Initiatives range from business process reengineering like the QPD program to empowering employees with a paperless, IT-driven system now in development. More information is available at www.vba.va.gov/transformation.

Under the initial strategy, the St. Petersburg VA Regional Office developed tailored processes and procedures to identify and pay disability claims within 30 days of receipt for veterans meeting Quick Pay criteria. That meant that the St. Petersburg office had to readjust their daily operations, educate the workforce, and put the QPD program into practice—fast.

Within four days, the regional office completed employee training, designed an evaluation strategy to

capture metrics, and paid \$6,000 to four veterans.

Broadcasting the Message

Recognizing that maintaining open lines of communication with employees was paramount, Nunziata quickly initiated an internal communications strategy. Employees remain up-to-date on program success via digital pop-up messages that provide information on the number of veterans paid, the total value of disability benefits paid through the QPD, and the average monthly increases in claims. These daily updates are supported through an electronic marquee that displays program metrics in the



Employees had input into building the Quick Pay program, and are kept up-to-date on its success.

regional office's public spaces.

To educate stakeholders on the program's growing success, Nunziata worked with the regional office staff to produce a flyer that promotes QPD. Targeted at three key groups—veterans, veterans service organizations and employees—the flyer provides a brief overview of QPD as well as a demonstration of its impact on veterans' payments and timeliness. Additionally, the St. Petersburg VARO staff provides regular updates to six local VSOs, staying in close touch with each organization's leadership.

Throughout the initial phases of the pilot, the St. Petersburg staff members have remained in constant

contact with veterans who have participated in the program. Initial feedback has been overwhelmingly positive—to date, 100 percent of veterans describe QPD as helpful to resolving their outstanding claims.

The Road Ahead

The program is already posting impressive returns. Ninety days after launch, QPD paid more than \$1 million in claims to 810 Florida veterans—417 of whom received their benefits within 30 days—resulting in an average monthly benefits increase of \$1,257. Additionally, 403 veterans received their first disability benefit payments through the program, which

also provided them with faster, easier access to the VA health care system.

But as impressive as they are, the numbers alone don't tell the entire story. Operating on the front lines of a new pilot initiative, the St. Petersburg staff has witnessed firsthand the difference the QPD program is making in the lives of the veterans they serve. From faster payments to fewer complications in the benefits review process, the QPD

is having a real and significant impact on the lives of Florida's veterans.

Looking ahead, Nunziata is optimistic about the program's potential to improve the disability claims process in other regional offices.

"The QPD program proves that we can, with the right resources and smart planning, rapidly launch an initiative that makes a measurable impact on veterans' quality of life," she said. VBA leadership is assessing the potential for replicating this program in other regional offices—allowing VA to pay benefits faster and more easily from coast to coast. **VA**

By Terry Jemison